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# Vietnam: The Truth at Last

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## How two "walk-in" intelligence sources paved the way for a major U.S.-Vietnamese breakthrough on POWs and MIAs

By BRUCE VAN VOORST WASHINGTON

TOM CLANCY OR JOHN LE CARRÉ might hesitate at making credible fiction of this tale. Imagine that the Vietnamese government signs a contract with an American researcher to write a book on the Vietnam War, using secret archives that Hanoi has insisted for 20 years do not exist. Then suppose that the American volunteers this information to the Pentagon, which first rebuffs him, then takes him in, only to discover that the evidence represents a genuine breakthrough in the decades-long effort to identify Americans missing or captured in Vietnam.

This is exactly what has happened since Ted Schweitzer, 50, a U.N. worker and university librarian, informed Washington officials last fall that he had not only got permission to review these hidden archives, but had been given an office in Hanoi's central Museum of the People's Army of Vietnam to review them. U.S. intelligence had long believed the museum housed a major cache of meticulously maintained and documented accounts of missing American service personnel; now they had proof.

By the time President Bush announced the news last week, Washington had enough fresh material to begin settling what might be hundreds of the unresolved cases. Schweitzer told TIME that while complete evidence lies scattered "throughout the country," the key is the museum's one-inch-thick central index—the Red Book—cataloging everything the Vietnamese government knows about American servicemen.

At first, Schweitzer said, he tried to sell his book proposal to New York City publishers, but for three years "nobody was interested." At "wit's end," he turned to an old friend in official Washington, State Department official Richard Armitage, then at the Pentagon. But when Schweitzer offered his services, he was turned down. "I had to force Ted down the throats of the intelligence bureaucracy," says a Defense Intelligence Agency official. The agency soon reversed itself, and under the code name Swamp Ranger, set Schweitzer to screen the Hanoi archives, copying enormous numbers of documents on a $50,000 data scanner the U.S. provided him—which Vietnam, to the Pentagon's amazement, allowed him to use.

**Ted Schweitzer with an archivist in the Museum of the People's Army**

In July, Swamp Ranger began to deliver the major part of what became a trove of more than 5,000 black-and-white photos. Many of them are different views of the same individuals, but 1,700 different servicemen are included. Schweitzer also copied thousands of supporting documents from the archives, including photos of artifacts such as dog tags, uniform name strips, helmets, flight suits, eyeglasses, ID cards, class and wedding rings and many other personal items. "At one point," recalls principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Carl Ford, "I suddenly thought, wow, the Rosetta stone of the MIA issue."

Most of the men in the photos are clearly dead; 272 show live servicemen known to be some of the 591 prisoners who returned to the U.S. in 1973 in Operation Homecoming. A Pentagon task force is working with photo interpreters to identify the rest, aided by considerable quantities of notes accompanying each picture in a paper sleeve, often including the date and location of a plane crash.

Among the first to be verified was F-4D fighter-bomber pilot Lieut. Colonel Joseph Morrison, shot down on Nov. 25, 1968. He died after he parachuted safely to the ground. But the F-4D is a two-seat aircraft, and Pentagon analysts noted one photo of Morrison's personal effects showed an extra pistol; this led them to confirm the death of his back-seater San D. Francisco. Intelligence analysts now expect that the Hanoi museum material already in hand may clear up 23 of the 135 so-called discrepancy cases, where the U.S. knows an individual survived a plane crash or was captured, but has not been able subsequently to account for him.

Schweitzer seems to have acquired his information through a quiet manner and dogged patience that won the trust of the Vietnamese. They regarded him as a hero who was severely beaten by Thai pirates while working for the U.N. to protect fleeing Vietnamese boat people, and as a benefactor who started a philanthropic foundation to deliver pharmaceuticals to Vietnamese medical clinics. His material was partly confirmed by black-and-white photos supplied by a North Carolina native named Eugene Brown. Brown apparently acquired his pictures through his Vietnamese wife, who had intelligence connections in her homeland. He offered his evidence this spring to the Pentagon in exchange for help in traveling to Vietnam. Although the materials Brown (code-named Druid Smoke) eventually delivered in many cases duplicated Schweitzer's, the two sources confirmed each other. "Anyone who thinks there's a big museum in Hanoi where you can back up a C-130 and answer all the POW/MIA questions is mistaken," said Schweitzer.

Initially, U.S. officials were uncertain what to make of these disclosures. Washington finally decided that Hanoi—or at least some officials there—was sending a signal that it finally wanted to meet Washington's principal precondition for reestablishing diplomatic relations: a full accounting of the missing. The payoff would be genuine progress toward normal ties and an end to the 17-year trade embargo, possibly before the end of the year.

What happens next depends entirely on the Vietnamese. Schweitzer says, "We're just at the beginning of the beginning." He is returning to Hanoi to help a team of American experts gain unfettered access to the documents. Schweitzer is worried that the archives could quickly deteriorate and that "key people who know a lot" could die before a full accounting is made. Though this new access provides no indication that there are any live American POWs, the U.S. may finally be able to give the dead a decent burial. ■